

Range Beef Cow Symposium XX

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Supplementing Grazing Cows

by **Mathew Elliott**

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— Kenneth Olson of South Dakota State University offered some cowboy economics and a little philosophy on the delivery and implementation of a rangeland supplementation program Dec. 13 during the 2007 Range Beef Cow Symposium in Fort Collins, Colo.

Cows plus a forage resource equals a fixed cost that will affect cow performance, Olson said. Ideally, a forage supply is abundant and the crude protein levels are above 5%, but that is not always the case. When nutrients are lacking, a supplementation program must be implemented.

With that in mind, Olson offered two goals: (1) reduce the cost of supplementation delivery and (2) ensure the feedstuff is consumed as uniformly as possible by all cows in the herd.

There are generally two ways to supplement — hand-feeding or self-feeding, Olson said. Producers must decide which method provides the most nutrients and is the most cost-efficient.

Hand-fed supplements will be consumed at the rate they are delivered. Olson noted several studies showing the differences in hand-fed supplementation by frequency of delivery. He focused on Bohnert et. al.

(2002) in which cows were supplemented daily, every third day or every sixth day.

The results showed increased performance as delivery frequency increased, Olson said. One advantage with increased delivery frequency was decreased influence of dominance, or competition, providing a more consistent intake. Another advantage, there were positive results shown by all feeding frequency increases, not just for the daily regimen, indicating you don't have to deliver supplements every day to get improved performance.

“Simple cowboy economics show us that if you deliver less [often], you save money,” Olson said, noting the labor, fuel and equipment savings. “We see opportunities to decrease delivery and an opportunity to help improve nutrition.”

Self-feeders are also an option in supplementation. Self-feeders reduce delivery requirements, allowing the animals to come and go as they choose. Most self-feeders incorporate some type of intake limiter, such as the hardness of a lick tub, to limit the intake in a single setting.

Self-feeders do have a large variation, Olson explained, from hardness to crude protein, forage quality, familiarity with the supplement, and social interaction/

dominance. However, if placed correctly, self-feeders could help increase forage utilization in some underutilized areas.

Olson warns that while self-feeders will cost more initially, delivery will be less expensive. That will save money through delivery equipment (truck or tractor), labor and, depending on traveling distance, gas and/or diesel fuel.

Whether hand-feeding or self-feeding supplements, Olson advised putting a pencil and paper to it, looking at what works best for your operation. Look at what protein and energy supplementation is needed and what resources you have to provide the supplements.

“Think about whether or not the cost balances for you,” Olson said. “Opportunities to make costs change exist.”

Range Beef Cow Symposium XX was hosted by the Cooperative extension services and animal science departments of Colorado State University, South Dakota State University, the University of Wyoming and the University of Nebraska at the Larimer County Fairgrounds and Events Complex Dec. 11-13. Additional coverage of the symposium is available at www.rangebeefcow.com.

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